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Surviving Another Year

by **Karen Hunter** (Senior Vice President, Strategy, Elsevier Science) <k.hunter@elsevier.com>

For a number of years I have frequently answered anyone asking how I am with a simple response: "Surviving." After September 11, I suppose that takes on a different meaning for all of us and I will have to modify my answer. But survival is still at the core of what many of us are trying to do day by day, either with respect to our personal lives or what we are trying to accomplish at work.

Survival for journal publishers, particularly biomedical publishers, in 2001 meant something a bit different from some past years. For one thing, we faced the "free the literature" movement in a new guise. Frustrated by the failure of **PubMed Central** to get traction among publishers, a small group of biomedical researchers decided to try a different approach. Labeling their effort the **Public Library of Science (PLOS)**, they started a campaign to get researchers to sign a statement that as of September 1, 2001, they would not submit a manuscript to, edit or review for, or personally purchase any journal that did not make its research articles available for free, and without copyright restriction, on a public server (preferably **PubMed Central**) within six months of publication. By the time September 1st arrived, over 20,000 scientists from around the world (many of them graduate students, but also at least one Nobel laureate) had signed.

The flag was up the flag pole, but very few publishers saluted. The demand was simply naïve and unreasonable and there were scientists who understood this and spoke out in opposition. Publishers collectively watched and waited as the summer wore on to see if there would be any effect. To date, a cautious estimate is that there has been little fallout. A couple of scientists have said they would not review for one or two of our journals. I am told that one of our most prestigious journals received an article in the summer from one of the most well-known of the **PLOS** advocates, asking that if we accepted the article after peer review we be sure that it was published before September 1st. Now, that's funny.

But that does not mean that all is quiet. A new, for-profit publisher **BioMed Central** is trying to piggyback on this **PLOS** initiative. They have chosen to charge authors (a variation on page charges, which have always been an option) and to ask for institutional support, albeit in a somewhat different way from a traditional subscription. Another new publisher, **The Scientific World**, is also trying to craft a business that would feed into (or on) this model.

Will either of these – or other such efforts – succeed? Or even if they succeed (where success is measured as making sufficient profit to stay in business or, in the case of **BioMed Central**, follow what has become its founder's pattern of finding a deep-pocket acquirer), will they affect our survival? Too early to tell, but I am not losing sleep over it.

Survival in 2001 also meant getting very serious about digital archiving. Not that we haven't been serious before. **Elsevier Science** added a formal archiving commitment to its **ScienceDirect** license in 1999. But the notion of a transitional period of dual paper and electronic collecting is under pressure at many universities. There is simply not the funding to support it and e-only is the preferred answer. That means archiving issues must be resolved. Fortunately, there appear to be enough people now focused on the problem that at least some of the hand-wringing angst is easing.

The **Mellon Foundation** stepped in to fund digital archiving research in 2001 and **Elsevier** participated in a project with **Yale University Library**. The **Library of Congress** was authorized by Congress to receive up to \$100 million for digital preservation. Real demonstration projects have shown success, most notably at the Royal Library in the Hague. On a national basis, I heard concerns about archiving from major libraries around the world, including in the U.S., Canada, Australia, Japan, Germany, England, Scotland and Switzerland. There is a clear sense of wanting a copy of the files within a specific national community. We are now close to agreements on establishing more than one large external library-based archive.

Elsevier Science has also introduced a new licensing option, called **E-Choice**. Modeled on the **Academic Press** licenses that we inherited with the AP acquisition, **E-Choice** offers electronic subscriptions independent of paper subscriptions. If a library then also wants to buy paper, they may do so at a "Deep Discount Price." This decoupling is a part of the process of making the transition to e-only easier administratively for both sides.

But many questions related to e-only and archiving remain. Indeed, one of our

staff recently asked me what I thought we would do if we were suddenly at war with a country holding an archive. Would that affect our delivery of services? It was an interesting question. Who is "we"? **Elsevier Science** is headquartered in the Netherlands, is a part of Reed Elsevier in London, and hosts its **ScienceDirect** database in the U.S. I honestly don't know the answer. I would like to think there would be no effect, but that might be naïve.

In a somewhat related project, in the course of 2001 **Elsevier Science** and several other publishers agreed with the **World Health Organization** to make medical journals available at no charge to libraries in the poorest countries in the world. WHO, in particular **Barbara Aronson** from the **WHO Library** in Geneva, convinced us that the time to act was now and the way to act was to provide online access.

Some of us reacted initially with stereotypical responses: these countries lack the necessary infrastructure; surely basic biomedical research journals are not what is needed; and what about any business we might lose (note that these last two points are clearly contradictory). **Barbara** and her colleagues had done their homework and convinced us in no uncertain terms that we could do this and survive and that if we did not do it, someone else's welfare would be compromised. The project is moving steadily ahead and I am glad that the political situation in Afghanistan is now such that we don't have to make a decision on whether they should be stricken from the roster for political reasons.

On another front, this year brought us back into the book business, big time. With the acquisition of the STM businesses of **Harcourt**, **Elsevier Science** now has within it a very large book publishing program. It is fascinating and not a little frightening to be plunged into the world of medical books and courseware. This is a true Darwinian world, working to gain the attention of medical educators and professionals. For someone focused so intently on libraries for so many years, I have to learn new survival tactics, or make them up as we go along.

The penetration of handhelds among medical students, for example, is truly extraordinary. Some medical schools now

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even require that students own them. I am probably too old to be comfortable with the notion of a doctor at my bedside consulting a computer before deciding what to say to me, but it is the future. Will this also be the way of MBAs and JDs and Ph.Ds in geosciences? Probably, and that means we have to again rethink entirely how we organize and deliver information. How does a library relate to information delivered on such very personal information tools? And does that mean that scholarly publishers, who are used to expecting libraries to be their primary channels of distribution, have to change that expectation also to survive?

On what is now the more traditional electronic journal front, the battle as it were is now being fought over usage. As one of my new AP colleagues said last summer, "we want the eyeballs on our site." Products that survive via advertising have always had this perspective. What you are promising your advertisers is "eyeballs." Subscription products that carried little advertising had much less of an orientation toward usage figures. And usage figures for paper were, after all, notoriously hard to get.

But usage is now the name of the game. That means the usage figures have to be clear and accurate. It also would help if everyone


were talking the same language. The best effort recently to deal with usage figures has been that of the **ICOLC**. (I say that not just because our **ScienceDirect** usage reports conform to **ICOLC** guidelines — but they do!) What is now needed is a way to standardize definitions across services. At **Elsevier** we would like to see that happen. We are also responding to the notion of providing for an independent audit of usage data — again, something that publications with advertising have done for decades.

Finally, when looking back on survival issues, clearly an extraordinary number of companies did not survive the year unscathed. We have seen the dot.coms disappear with frightening speed. The collapse of **netLibrary** is an obvious example, but e-book initiatives have been pulled back one after another. This has the look of early pioneers — as you know, you can recognize pioneers by the arrows in their backs. I truly think this is a pause and retrenchment, not an end. But there sure are a lot of talented young people who suddenly think law and medicine look a lot better as careers than that start-up that might go for an IPO within 24 months.

What do I think will be required to survive in the next few years? That is clearly a much harder question. Good and very creative financial skills, whether you are a library or the publisher. Not "creative" in

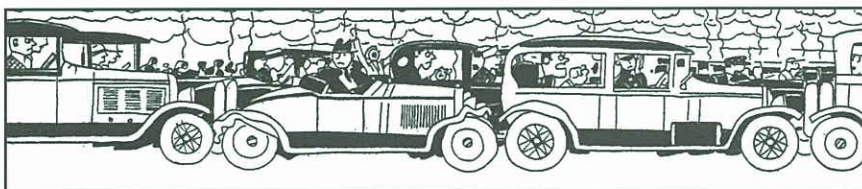
the **Enron** sense. Just a lot of out-of-the-box thinking about how to reduce costs and spend money wisely. That has to be coupled with a serious ability to be flexible. While I am probably preaching to the converted, nobody is going to last who tries to cling to "but we've always done it that way." But I suspect those folks were flushed from the system long ago.

The need to be flexible is closely coupled to the need to listen. Listening to customers is something we are trying to do. This year within my company a new, explicit set of company values was introduced and these are being taken very, very seriously. One of these is to "value people." Another is to be "customer-focused." While "value people" has a strong internal orientation, it obviously also has to be turned toward your customers as well: authors, readers and librarians. I recall more than 20 years ago when I found myself really annoyed with one journal editor and a colleague of mine immediately stopped me and said, "You can't even think those things. You must always stay positive." Does that mean the old adage that the customer is always right? Not exactly, but it does mean that if the customer is unhappy, something is wrong.

So, going back to **Darwinian** principles again, it is survival of the fittest. We are just in the process as a community of redefining what it means to be the fittest. 

On the Road

by **Alfred Jaeger** (Alfred Jaeger, Inc., 66 Austin Blvd., Commack, NY 11725) <jaeger@ajaeger.com>



I know that a few columns of "On The Road" have not been published due to my hectic schedule, however, in view of the events that happened here in New York on September 11, 2001, I thought it was imperative to not only publish a story about travel, but also encourage those who have not flown since that date to continue your routine and travel with a renewed spirit. My first flight after the **World Trade Center** was two weeks later, flying to the **NELA Conference** in Burlington, VT. It was an uneventful flight from New York's **Laguardia Airport** to Burlington on **US Airways**. A normally crowded 52 seat twin engine plane only carried 8 of us passengers. The security at New York's **Laguardia Airport** was more intense, however, arriving at the airport 2 1/2 hours prior to flight guarantees getting through security and making it on to the plane in time. As previously mentioned, the flight was quite beautiful as the twin engine deHavilland propeller-driven plane flew at

a lower altitude, approximately 18,000 feet. Traveling north of Albany, New York, you could see the **Adirondacks** approaching on the left and to the right were the green mountains of Vermont. Finally, landing in Burlington over **Lake Champlain**, was a fitting conclusion to my first flight since the events two weeks earlier in New York City. Since then, I have had approximately eight other flights with no particular incidents, however, security has been tight in most airports, including **National Guard** to ensure everything is checked and any irregularities reported. One flight that I had recently was on an airline called **Jet Blue**, out of New York's **Kennedy Airport**, going to New Orleans, Louisiana, non-stop for a **Tri Chapter Medical Library Conference**. I had flown **Jet Blue** before and enjoyed their service which is marked by some interesting features such as first class seats throughout the cabin, in addition to assorted snacks comprised of their unique blue potato chips, a signature of **Jet Airlines**. The reason why I am

mentioning this flight is because **Jet Blue** is known for their investment in security, purchasing the first secure cabin door to the cockpit costing \$10,000 per installation. This was very comforting to me and many of the other passengers knowing that the door was in place for that flight. The cabin was approximately 1/3 occupied, which was better than my previous flight to Vermont, and included a few people that attended the same conference. In my same row seated next to me was another business traveler who had flown many times before as he mentioned in our brief conversation, however, approximately 1 hour into the flight I happened to look up from my newspaper and discovered that the cabin door had been opened by the stewardess who was engaged in conversation with the pilot and co-pilot through the opened door. Standing along side of her and observing the cabin was a slight sized steward, evidently seeing if anything might happen with the door open, at least I hoped that is why he

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